

Ellinwood Memorial Day Ceremony

May 28, 2007

Thank you for allowing me to share Memorial Day with you. We come together on this important holiday to honor the men and women of Ellinwood and the surrounding communities who answered the call in service to our country and to expose our children and grandchildren to the sacrifices they have made and the debts we owe.

To the veterans buried here and their families and friends who have gathered, and to all the veterans with us this morning, let me first express thanks. Because of their service and sacrifice, we live in the strongest, freest and greatest nation in the history of the world. We live with the blessing of freedom they fought and died for. We are the benefactors of their courage, their commitment to duty, and their deaths. Let us forever be grateful.

Our country has had many wars in its history. It is remarkable that from the Revolutionary War to today, we have been blessed with men and women who were willing to sacrifice God's precious gift of life. Life is God's most precious gift. But we know that the cause for which they gave their lives is worthy. Freedom is worth death, for without freedom, life loses its meaning. We are thankful that individuals of each generation have been willing to serve America, and that they would risk everything to allow future generations the opportunity to live in freedom. Over a million American service members have died for our country since the inception of our nation.

In this last year alone, we have said goodbye to many Kansans - active military, reservists and members of the National Guard. They are more than numbers - they are our fathers, mothers, daughters and sons; our friends. Their actions provide us with the meaning of this ceremony far

better than any comments a Congressman could make.

This Memorial Day is particularly important because our nation is at war. As we gather in fellowship and remembrance this morning, here in this wonderful town in the heart of America, we also think of those halfway around the world fighting to keep us safe and free. For our service members, there is no three-day weekend, no family barbeque, no sale at the mall.

Though we meet here this morning in peace, today in Iraq or Afghanistan an American soldier patrols a dangerous street against an enemy who hides in the shadows and seeks to kill him.

Somewhere in the U.S., a wife waits by the phone for news of her loved one. A child sits in her bedroom and wonders when and if her dad will return home. Our thoughts and prayers are with these patriotic warriors and their families. Because they sacrifice, we can be here today.

We are truly blessed to live in a nation today where individuals volunteer to serve on our behalf to defend our country and our way of life - no matter the cost. But I am often concerned that while we ask so much of our military, we ask so little of ourselves.

This division in our society is only increasing. Each year, the percentage of our population who has worn a uniform declines. Fewer individuals and families have a personal connection with the military. Fewer opportunities exist to learn from veterans and to understand from them what it means to serve your country.

I realize that not everyone can or should join the military. But as Tom Brokaw once said when

recalling the selfless spirit and drive of what he termed the Greatest Generation, what we can do as Americans is to "re-enlist as citizens." As enlisted citizens, we can support our service members and recognize their service. We can cherish and not squander our liberties they fought and died for. And perhaps most importantly, we can begin to pay our debts and honor their sacrifice by working together to better our world.

Too often, Washington, D.C. needs a reminder of what is important - that it is not polls, partisan politics or the next election - it's working together to do what's best for our country. Sometimes in our nation's capital, the important things are too easily forgotten. When I need a reminder of what is important, I'll take a walk - from the nation's Capitol building to the Lincoln Memorial. Between these two points I will pass the Washington Monument, the Vietnam Wall, the Korean War Memorial and now the WWII Memorial. These memorials and monuments to our country's great leaders and to its everyday citizen soldiers put everything in proper perspective.

This Memorial Day, here in this cemetery, we should put our own lives in perspective. To help us, I want to share with you a poem entitled "Memorial Day". It was written by Edgar Guest, an American poet from the early 1900s who was known as the "People's Poet" for his simple writing about everyday life.

"The finest tribute we can pay
unto our hero dead today,
is not a rose wreath, white and red,
in memory of the blood they shed;
it is to stand beside each mound,
each couch of consecrated ground,
and pledge ourselves as warriors true
unto the work they died to do.

Into god's valleys where they lie
at rest, beneath the open sky,
triumphant now o'er every foe,
as living tributes let us go.
No wreath of rose or immortelles
or spoken word or tolling bells
will do to-day, unless we give
our pledge that liberty shall live.

Our hearts must be the roses red
we place above our hero dead;
today beside their graves we must
renew allegiance to their trust;
must bare our heads and humbly say
we hold the flag as dear as they,
and stand, as once they stood, to die
to keep the stars and stripes on high.

The finest tribute we can pay
unto our hero dead today
is not of speech or roses red,
but living, throbbing hearts instead,
that shall renew the pledge they sealed
with death upon the battlefield:
that freedom's flag shall bear no stain
and free men wear no tyrant's chain."

Those who served in our country's past wars gave us not freedom, but the opportunity for freedom. The battle to preserve our liberty must be fought by every generation each day. The heroes we pay tribute to today have shown us the way, and now it is our turn to follow them in service to each other. To re-enlist as American citizens. To do as the poem tells us - to "pledge ourselves as warriors true, unto their work they died to do."

The strength of our nation lies with its citizens. Only when each citizen feels the duty to do his or her part for America will our nation prosper and be secure. This won't come as a result of our

individual successes, but in what we accomplish together. So when today's ceremony and speeches have ended and the flags have been taken down, that will be our lasting tribute - our "living tribute" - to our service members.

This community, this state, and this nation honors each of you here who served your country and those who now lay in their final resting place -- may God bless you all. We thank God for giving us the gift of life and for the gift of heroes, and we ask Him to bless each of us with the courage to honor those gifts through our actions as citizens of this great nation.